

ROOTS...

**ST. MARYS, ITS LAND
AND ITS PEOPLE**

Aboriginals



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ROOTS

ST. MARYS, ITS LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

GABE, THE SAGMORE OF THE MALISEETS

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by F. Brucie Greene

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ST. MARYS - ITS LAND AND ITS PEOPLES

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Gabriel Acquin
91 years old.
Died October 2, 1901

R O O T S St. Marys, its Land and its People
by F. Brucie Greene

In the year 1798 a young ensign of the New Jersey Volunteers received several land grants in the area. Two lots in the Devon area in which we are interested were lots 21 and 22.

These lots ran to the river and were situated between what is today Cliff Street, MacLaren Avenue and Hughes Street. The young man's name was Xenophon Joutt (Jewett).

On Lot 22 was a spring, and as far as I know is still there. There were cedar trees, some of which are still there, and an Indian family by name of Acquin.

In the early 1800's the nearest Indian bands to Fredericton were located at Kingsclear, where the Maliseets had established their village of Aucpaque, "Head of Tide". They had abandoned Meductic in the previous century.

In the immediate Fredericton area a few Indians were usually found living in shacks or wigwams on unoccupied land near the river.

But Gabe Acquin and his family occupied the land mentioned, probably on account of the spring. It was higher than land near the river at this time in history.

When the estate of Xenophon Jewett was being settled by his executors, they told Gabe that if he would move from there he could have the front. This was in 1847. When they were surveying the land for him it was found to be two rods short in width, so the Governor of the Day who was present with his secretary bought the two rods from his own pocket and gave it to Gabe.

Gabe and his family moved to the land by the river and stayed there for period of ten years before he built a house. When he did, it was long and narrow, and he resided there until he died.

Gabe was a liberal man and so he allowed his friends who were living on unoccupied land to move their wigwams to his land. Some later

made houses of camp-like structures, so the place became known as the Indian Camps of St. Mary's Ferry.

The families who moved on old Gabe's land were St. Pierrier, later shortened to Sappier; a family by name of Bear, one named Polchies, Sacoby and Saulis. This man was always called Digby because he was a Micmac from Digby, Nova Scotia. There was another from Nova Scotia called Alsom Brooks and later a whole family of Pauls who came from Quebec in the winter. In fact, along the way a child was born in a teepee in the woods. They arrived and stayed with Gabe on his land the rest of the winter and then went on to Saint John. Some came back later.

He showed my grandfather, the late W. B. Dayton, where his father and mother were buried and my grandfather showed me. They are buried on land now owned by the provincial government. The Power Commission has it enclosed with a high wire fence where the transformers are on Union Street.

The great Sagmore of the Maliseets, Gabriel Acquin and his wife, had three sons, Noel, Peter, and Steve and two daughters, Sara, who married a Sappier, and Katherine, who married a Jim Paul.

In the 1840's, 50's and 60's, Gabe was sought out by the officers of the British Army stationed in Fredericton, as well as in Saint John and Halifax, to accompany them on their hunting trips and fishing trips. He taught them woodcraft as only he knew it and guiding them far into the New Brunswick wilderness, produced the fish and game at the proper time and place. He knew every barren where the game congregated and where to hunt them at any particular season whether on the Caanan, or Canes River at Mount Champlain or in the interior near Nictor or on the Napisiguit Lakes. It is recorded that he was without equal at calling the moose and that he knew the language of all the animals of the wilderness; on one occasion he called a mink which crossed a stream and approached within a few feet of the place where Gabe was hidden.

It was not only his knowledge of the wilds which endeared Gabe to

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the British officers. Gabe was something of a natural philosopher, and his pithy sayings were such that they could be repeated again and again. He was always welcome at the Officers' Mess at the Old Barracks in Officers' Square which is now a museum.

Successive governors made him welcome at Government House and he accepted their hospitality as an equal; when Honourable John Henry Thomas Manners-Sutton became Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick in 1854, he became very friendly with Gabe, and engaged him on many a hunting trip with the government party. Gabe was in charge of everything including food. My great-grandfather opened a general store in St. Marys (where Bowlyns is today) and the store was less than half a mile from Gabe's camps, and supplied all the food for his hunting trips, Gabe was particular about his supplies. The store of Sam Dayton imported especially for Gabe from abroad such items as "Cross and Blackwell pickles", and "Lee and Perrin sauce" and other goods had to be stocked especially for his trade. Gabe was a very good friend of my grandfather through his life.

Governor Manners-Sutton held a party at Government House between Christmas and New Years' each year for Gabe and his fellow Indians of the St. Marys Band. Captain Harris D. Viet, who was one of the Governor's Aide de Camp wrote the following description of the Governor's Ball: "It was a very odd spectacle that the large ball room presented on our entering for all around its sides Indians were squatted on the floor, male and female, papooses excepted, and all were dressed in Indian fashion and after all were fed, they favored us with a Native dance, music was drum and rattles made with pebbles in glass jars and they also used bones which they beat together."

Gabe Acquin's association with the British officers engendered in him a contempt for everything colonial and like the officers Gabe came to think that anything done in New Brunswick that was contrary to the custom of England was wrong. When the New Brunswick government in 1855 urged on by Samuel Leonard Tilley passed a prohibition act making the manufacture and sale, and consumption of intoxicating liquor illegal in the Province, Gabe who had no tётallers among his friends disapproved of the act so

strongly that he decided to do something about it. This was his only venture into politics, perhaps just as well as he not only got the act repelled, but caused the government of the day to be turned out of office necessitating a provincial election.

A few months after the prohibition act became law, Gabe and the Governor were out on one of their hunting trips and their tent caught fire during the night. Gabe got out first and he would not help the Governor out until he promised to dissolve the House of Assembly. Whether there was any truth in this story or not, it is a matter of record that the Governor did dissolve the House, illegally according to the then new principals of responsible government, and after an election the new Government repealed the prohibition act almost unanimously. Gabe was afterwards heard to say the Governor was a good man who kept his word.

1860 Visit of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales
1861

1883 Great International Fisheries Exhibition

When Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, made his memorable visit to North America in 1860, he arrived in Fredericton on the evening of Saturday, August 4. Early the next morning Gabe, the great Sagmore, donned his best attire, took his shiny new birch-bark canoe and paddled over the river up past Government House, just to see what was going on, as Gabe said.

Advancing near the wharf he saw a young man standing smoking a cigar. The young man waved Gabe in to shore where he could get a better look at the strange craft.

He asked Gabe to take him out in it, which Gabe did. He paddled his guest across the river and up the Nashwaaksis River and then back to Government House, where they were met by another young man, the Duke of Newcastle, who was very upset because Gabe's guest was none other than the Prince himself.

The little trip caused the people of the Cathedral some anxious moments anticipating the Prince's arrival for morning service, which was late.

Gabe said the Prince gave him some gold pieces but would never tell how much.

When William H. Venning, who was Inspector of Fisheries for New Brunswick and Nova Scotia for forty years in the last century, had many reminiscences about Sanchen Gabe, as he called him, these were recorded in the local press.

Venning said that he first met Gabe when the chief was about sixty years old, but was as lithe and sinewy as a much younger man and could handle a birch-bark canoe better than any canoeman he had ever known. When he was Overseer of Fisheries in this Province he hired Gabe to travel with him, on his inspection trips.

In 1883, a great international fisheries exhibition was scheduled to be held in London, England. Venning got the idea to send Sanchen

Gabe to represent the North American Indian.

He said it occurred to him that, "a live Indian in his wigwam surrounded by the various things common to his nomadic life; making of moccasins, baskets, fish, spears, paddles and miniature canoes would be a great asset. Paddling a real birch-bark canoe on the ponds of Kensington Gardens, where the Canadian Exhibition was set up, would be something to see".

The Department of Marine and Fisheries approved of the idea and Sanchen Gabe was hired at \$2.00 a day plus expenses.

Gabe went to Halifax where he boarded a steamer for England.

When Gabe arrived in London he set up his camp on the South Kensington ponds where the Canadian exhibition was being held. Gabe became the chief attraction of the fisheries exhibition.

The free life of the North American Indian had long been extolled in English literature but few Englishmen had ever seen a live Indian. Gabe was an accomplished showman and took full advantage of the situation.

Moreover nearly every officer who had known him when they were stationed in New Brunswick, 20, 30 or even 40 years before came to see him. Many of them had risen to high rank.

They entertained him at their London clubs and at their homes as the greatest social lion of the day.

After the exhibition was over several of these officers took him to their ancestral estates and did everything they could to show their great pleasure in meeting again their former companion and guide in the New Brunswick wilderness.

Every member of the British Royal Family, with the exception of the Queen, visited Gabe at the exhibition. Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, and Prince Alfred were particularly pleased to see him again and review the events of their visit to Fredericton in 1860 and 1861.

Sagmore Gabe had many interesting stories to tell when he got back home.

One of the best was about the difference between real ladies and make-believe ladies. He took many passengers in his birch bark canoe for rides on the South Kensington Ponds and with varying results. He said Princess Beatrice and the Prince of Wales girls were real ladies as they sat down on the bottom of the canoe and kept quiet as he told them to do.

But make-believe ladies insisted on sitting on the cross bars and when the canoe tipped they jumped around and squawked until it upset. Then they would tumble into the pond.

Gabe brought a large book home with him which someone made for him. The title on the cover was "Diplomatic and State Correspondence of the Maliseet Indian - Gabe". Also, there was a record of visitations and levees held by the Great Chief, during the Great International Fisheries Exhibition in 1883.

When Gabe landed in Saint John on his return trip from England he was met by his family and his wife, whom Gabe called "Mrs. Gabe".

When a reporter asked her why she did not go too, she replied "too much water".

While the Sagmore was in England he received many presents and tips worth much more than his pay. There were a few watches and rings in his possession but much of his wealth was in currency.

As the Sanchon could neither read nor write, my great-grandfather, Gabe's friend, persuaded him to place the money in the bank. When Gabe needed cash he would come to my great-grandfather and he would make him out a cheque. Gabe would make his "X" and then get into his birch bark canoe and paddle over to the city to cash his cheque.

The Saint John newspaper in 1883 asked Gabe for statements about various game in the province. Gabe said that the moose were not as

common as they used to be. The caribou, however, were becoming more common every year. About the deer, he said there were not as many in the Province as there used to be.

He said about 40 to 45 years before he had seen as many as sixty killed in a two week period near Fredericton Junction. He said they came into the Province from Upper Canada about that time, but were soon followed by the wolves which killed many of them. The best place to find deer in 1883 was near Magaguadavic and Oromocto Lakes.

Bears, he said, were increasing in number all the time.

He also told the reporter that he had killed an "Indian devil" once and he said an Indian devil was the same as the panther or catamountain of New England, a fierce animal.

Finally in speaking of the moose, he said, "Do you know in fifty years I believe that, like the Indians, they will be all gone."

It has been 96 years since Gabe made that prediction and we still have moose and still have deer but probably would not have had if not for game laws. The Indian is still around. Gabe was right in many predictions but in this one he was wrong.

The final tribute to Gabe in the Saint John paper in 1883 when the Sagmore came home, shows that this man had a place in the hearts of all New Brunswickers who knew him. It said, "Gabe Acquin is honest in his dealings. Few white men can be trusted so implicitly. Long may the Sagmore live to exemplify the best traits of a race that still possesses much that is noble in its nature."

1686 VISIT OF BISHOP ST. VALLIER

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In 1686 Bishop St. Vallier visited this part of the world. He came from France to Quebec and took a trip to visit the missions of the church in what was then New France.

He visited Meductic and went on to Port Royal in Acadia. During his visit he mentioned visiting St. Ann and St. Marys on the opposite of the St. Ann Portage and from St. Marys to the Miramichi.

So we can assume he named this side of the river. He wrote an account of his visit which was published in France in 1688.

At the end of the present St. Marys Street in this City (Fredericton) was a cleft in the river bank made by many moccasin feet and the landing of canoes to portage through the Miramichi.

The trail was from the river bank across from present Union Street where the Racer's Edge (a tavern) that recently burned was, over the present railway tracks and up through the present reserve land to the Nashwaak.

When the village of St. Marys was settled another road went up St. Marys and on to Heron Lake (now Kilarney Lake) which was known as the Miramichi Road.

The cleft in the river bank made by Indian canoes later became the landing for the St. Marys ferry. My great-grandfather had his store near this landing at the top of the hill. Gabe's land was not far from this store. He shopped there by barter, trade and cash.

In 1765 the Nova Scotia government gave the Indians four acres of land at St. Ann.

St. Ann on the opposite side of the river was not mentioned during the time when Billibon occupied a fort on the Nashwaak where the Irving Oil tanks are today, but there was an encampment where the present RCMP headquarters are today.

New Brunswick was elevated to Provincial standing in 1784 by an Imperial edict and although the new province did not always confirm grants made prior to this date, the one made to the Indians of St. Ann was upheld.

In 1762 a group of New Englanders attempted to settle on this land and they were told to move by Indians who came down the river complete with war paint and tomahawks accompanied by their priest. The New Englanders moved off and went down the river to Mougerville.